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## Public intellectuals in times of crisis: what do they have to offer?: reflections on the public intellectual's role

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**Public Intellectuals in Times of Crisis: What Do They Have to Offer?: Reflections on the Public Intellectual's Role** by Pat O'Connor (University of Limerick: 26<sup>th</sup> November, 2009)

*Public Intellectuals: Definition and Possibilities*

Miliband (1982:87) uses the word intellectuals 'to denote the people who are mainly concerned with the formation, articulation and dissemination of ideas'. Gramsci (1971:9) suggests that everyone can be an intellectual, but that not everyone in society 'has the function of intellectuals'. Implicit in Gramsci's ideas about intellectuals is a concern with ideology and the way in which ideas and systems of ideas are used by the powerful to present social arrangements as 'natural' inevitable' what people want'. He also referred to the existence of traditional intellectuals (such as teachers and academics; judges and lawyers) whose impartiality he questioned.

O'Dowd (1996:16) argues that historically in Ireland intellectuals were pre-occupied with national identity and with "constructing" or "imagining" the nation'. In an increasingly consumerist society, they became 'the 'professionals', the bureaucrats, the producers and distributors of 'culture', well paid but politically irrelevant' (O'Dowd, 1996:20). It is now glaringly obvious that the market and consumerism are no longer sufficient as sources of meaning or identity. The political and moral role of intellectuals under these circumstances is no longer politically redundant. O'Dowd (1996:7) suggested that the relationship between intellectuals and power bases in Irish society- whether these are 'class, institutional, political and gender dimensions' was typically ignored.

Various ways of categorizing intellectuals have been put forward. Burawoy (2005) identifies four types of knowledge, each of which potentially has a public aspect (O'Connor, 2006) and implicit in each of these is a concept of a public intellectual: firstly critical knowledge, concerned with challenging taken-for-granted ideas and reflecting an underlying commitment to a 'better world'; secondly policy oriented knowledge concerned with providing policy solutions and, in particular, holding the

state publicly accountable; thirdly knowledge emerging from and concerned with a popular dialogue with the public around relevant issues; and fourthly knowledge around methods and the conceptual frameworks available to those interested in the scientific status of the knowledge.

There are always contradictions in our taken-for-granted views of the world, 'that can be exploited for ideological challenge and resistance' (Baker et al, 2009:215). Some intellectuals, because of their background or attitude to power can demystify these taken-for granted views of the world and 'construct new forms of discourse through which effective opposition and critical expression can be achieved' (Ransome, 1992:196). Thus, they identify choices that might otherwise be ignored because they constitute 'a latent or manifest challenge to the values or interests of the decision maker' (quoted in Lukes, 1974:44).

It has been suggested that: 'If the intellectual wishes to understand the society in which he (sic) lives, he (sic) has only one course open to him and that is to adopt the point of view of its most underprivileged members' (Sartre, 1974:255). The night of the banking crisis in September a year ago, and the decision to create NAMA involved intensive consultation between the Government and the Bankers. Who adopted the perspective of the underprivileged, and thought through the impact of these decisions on them? The impact on women has attracted even less attention (despite the exemplary work of agencies such as the National Women's Council). Indeed, the state by endorsing neo-liberal capitalist policies created the Celtic Tiger to a very considerable extent on the backs of women, with little concern with the ultimate impact on their lives (O'Hagan, 2009). and seems equally indifferent to the impact of its demise on them.

Theoretically then, public intellectuals can be seen as concerned with creating new agendas and raising issues that those in power currently would wish to avoid; they can also be seen as concerned with transforming what Wright Mills (1970) called private troubles into public issues. Thus for example, public intellectuals might be concerned

with raising issues about the appropriateness of a total focus on the market (to the exclusion of society); about the extent to which the current social and political arrangements (including distributions of wealth) are inevitable or about the idea that gender is now irrelevant since ‘equality is a *fait accompli*’ (Ging, 2009).

### ***What do we mean by ‘Times of Crisis’?***

In Ireland, we are all acutely aware of a banking crisis, a wider economic crisis, a political crisis and an unemployment crisis. Underlying these is a crisis concerning the power of the market and its relationship with the state –and ultimately of the priority given to the creation of private wealth over all other social or economic objectives (Kirby et al, 2009). In the future, it seems very clear that poverty will increase and long-term unemployment and civil unrest will be realities. There will be an even greater lack of trust of those in political positions and of those professionals who are seen to be ‘in the pay of’ organisations that are seen as simply committed to advancing their members’ interests. Satirists such as Scrap Saturday problematised the definition of the ‘national interest’ in the 1980s-and we all enjoyed the joke. Now faced with ever more revelations involving other high profile people, in the context of a deepening economic crisis, the question of the legitimacy of the authority of the state is being raised. The fact that the political elite and indeed the business elite is male dominated adds a further filter in terms of their concerns and priorities. We are arguably on the brink of a crisis of legitimacy on class and gender lines. Even before the economic collapse, the legitimacy of institutional power overwhelmingly held by men was becoming problematised. Thus Connell (1987: 159) identified ‘a crisis of institutionalisation’ involving ‘a weakening of the ability of the institutional order of family-plus-state to sustain the legitimacy of men’s power’ with measures around equality, which help create the legitimacy of the state being seen to ‘disrupt the legitimacy of domestic patriarchy’ (ibid: 160).

Gender as an issue in Irish society to-day includes poverty amongst women-especially amongst women who are lone parents; and the difficulties experienced, particularly by women, in combining paid work and family responsibilities in a society where women

still carry the main responsibility for housework and child care (Lynch and Lyons, 2008). Women experience 'glass ceilings' and homosocial organisational cultures in male dominated organisations, with sizeable proportions of those who have been successful in such organisations reporting discrimination and prejudice (Humphreys et al, 1999; O'Connor, 1996- see also O'Connor, 2009b). We know that per hour, women still earn less than men (86% per hour). We know that even amongst young graduates in the public sector, patterns of differential privileging of men and women are apparent within the first five years (Russell et al, 2005) –and that these patterns are more extreme in the private sector. Gendered patterns persist, unnoticed, even within family life (where boys are likely to get more pocket money than girls (McCoy and Smyth, 2004) and are less likely to undertake domestic chores (Leonard, 2004)). The under-performance of boys relative to girls in the educational system is seen by the State, the educational system and the media as reflecting the inadequacies of the educational system while the achievements of middle class children are seen as reflecting their greater ability. Thus in contrast to the class based message, there has been no attempt to encourage boys to emulate the strong work ethic, deference, diligence and achievement orientation involved in 'doing girl' (Clancy, 2001; Lynch and Lodge, 2002). Why do you think that is?

In the public discourses generated by the state, the educational institutions and frequently by the media, gender patterns are simultaneously assumed to exist and are denied since they are seen as reflecting essentialist and immutable realities, which are not amenable to state intervention (Ging, 2009). Gendered assumptions still underpin state policies (O'Connor, 2008b) and are arguably part of the 'habitus' (Bourdieu, 1977: 82-83) of many of those involved in state policy and in the educational system and who grew to manhood when the Marriage Bar was in existence. Interestingly the area where women are likely to be in senior positions is in civic society and the organisations related to that. Thus women constitute the majority of those heading Community Development Projects in disadvantaged areas, whether as Programme Co-ordinators or as Chairs of the Voluntary Management Committees (O'Dowd, 2009). Interestingly such programmes are targeted for cutting.

This government has between consistently and actively disinterested in gender equality. It fused the Dept of Equality and Law Reform with the very much larger and more conservative Dept of Justice in 1997 (O'Connor, 2008c) and in 2008 imposed a cut of 42 per cent in the Equality Authority's budget at a time when cuts of 9% were being imposed elsewhere. It has shown no willingness to ensuring that proportionate gender representation exists in the political system. It has been less than assiduous in implementing the State's 40 per cent gender balance recommendation as regards the composition of Boards in key areas.

There are fundamental tensions at the heart of Irish culture to-day. We have lost faith in the traditional source of moral controls, the institutional roman catholic church. We are becoming an increasingly individualised society. The effective world is contracting to 'me and mine' whether this is defined by family, or class based friendships or political tribes. The valorization of the market has dominated public discourse, endorsed by the State and it has begun to impact on higher educational institutions. The fact that through NAMA and the Special Purpose Vehicle we are effectively transferring massive resources from the taxpayer to organisations with majority private control, staffed predominantly at the top by those who have brought about the collapse and whose main responsibility is to increase private profits, raises fundamental questions about the future of the state and its legitimacy in the eyes of the public.

In summary then, in addition to the commonly identified crises, there is the ongoing tendency to see gendered patterns- if they are seen at all- as a reflection of biological reality and beyond the responsibility of any structure. Beneath this kind of thinking arguably lies fantasies about a return to a male breadwinner model (a fantasy that sits uneasily with the fact that 43 per cent of the female labour force has third level qualifications: Russell et al, 2009). In a context characterised by a decline in confidence in both the market and the state, an ethos of 'looking after your own' if defined broadly enough may constitute some kind of a positive lever in a morass of

disillusionment and public intellectuals have a useful contribution to make in extending that definition.

***What facilitates the development of Public Intellectuals?***

In a sense the most obvious place to look for Public Intellectuals is in the Universities, because of the nature of their roles there in the creation and transmission of knowledge. And yet in many ways Universities are problematic sites for such intellectuals, partly because of the current perceived nature and purpose of education and the kinds of structures that facilitate it.

It has been suggested that ‘universities have been transformed increasingly into powerful consumer oriented corporate networks, whose public interest values have been seriously challenged’ (Lynch et al, 2009:296; also Sullivan, 2009). Paradoxically, this has been done in the name of increasing the public accountability- albeit that their patriarchal character has been ignored. Gramsci (1971) saw education as a process involving not only the acquisition of specific skills but ‘the development of intellectual self discipline and moral independence that enables people to make sense of their own experiences within the broader context of society’. In other words, in Wright Mills (1970) terms, it helps people to see private troubles (whether these are unemployment, poverty, distribution of wealth and privilege; discrimination) as issues that need public action. Lynch et al (2009) suggest that there are many structural and cultural obstacles to universities working this way- including their disciplinary focus and their concern with distancing themselves from normative activities and depicting these as an unworthy politization of knowledge. They argue that universities inhibit the development of critical public intellectuals concerned with challenging taken-for-granted ideas and putting forward conceptions of a ‘better world’.

There is a tension between the increasingly specialist nature of knowledge required in the Universities, and the activity of the public intellectual, whether as reflected in critical reflection or in public dialogue. The development of measures of research excellence that rest on assessments made by other professionals as reflected in citation

rates (mainly generated by international refereed journal articles), as opposed to more broadly based indicators of societal impact, further undermine connections with the wider society and potentially absolves academics from responsibilities as regards societal transformation. Paradoxically then the result can be that those with no specialist social scientific or humanist knowledge at all are most comfortable with adopting the role of the 'generalist humanistic intellectual addressing a broad social constituency' (O'Dowd, 1996: 1).

Although purporting to encourage the public accountability of universities, the State is implicitly fostering a managerial ethos rather than one focussed on social justice/human rights issues. One of the features of a managerialist system is the development of large Executive Groups, who are overwhelmingly appointed by and report directly to the President. In that context, there are strong pressures towards homosociability (i.e. Presidents appointing people like themselves: Grummell et al, 2009; O'Connor 2009b). Since the majority of the funding for Universities is received from the State we have to ask, how likely is it that senior academic management will challenge State policies or actions? Individual factors, such as reluctance to becoming involved in public fora, lack of time, or limited leadership capacities and a sense that such activity is not institutionally valued also exist. Furthermore, even if University based public intellectuals do emerge, raising of gender related issues may still be problematic in a context where the overwhelming majority (82-90%) of those at professorial or senior management positions in the Universities are men and where the culture has been described as homosocial and conformist (O'Connor, 2009a)

For Gramsci (1971) each type of economic production created a strata of intellectuals-including both technical people as well as those that legitimated that kind of economic production politically. Currently the state is very much concerned with the production of graduates with narrowly defined skill bases that can facilitate the development of industry to-day- particularly those in the science and technology area (O'Connor, 2008b). The taken-for-granted importance of these areas has become a mantra of powerful lobbyists such as Science Foundation Ireland and has been reflected in the

investment of very substantial levels of funding in research in these areas, focussed on exports rather than employment. Even in so far as one accepts that scientific or technological ideas are important for economic development, it is by no means clear that innovations in such areas are the exclusive prerogative of science or technology graduates. Yet, policies related to education seem directed primarily towards particular areas of science and technology -areas whose sustainability has been questioned (Sheehan, 2005; Jordan and O'Leary). During the Celtic Tiger the sectors that were identified as experiencing considerable growth between 1997-2004 were areas such as health professionals, teachers, care assistants; financial accountants and clerks; craftsmen/builders, labourers and sales assistants (Turner and D'Art, 2005). It is by no means clear how such areas created a need for University educated science and technology graduates. Yet state officials and influential intellectuals saw such investment as key (O'Connor, 2008b). If so far as graduates and post graduates from these areas continue to work in state funded projects within universities, the relative costs and benefit of such employment creation needs to be balanced against alternatives. A recent OECD report (2007) found that Ireland had the highest child care costs as a proportion of earnings in the 26 OECD countries- with just under a third of families' expenditure going on child care. In this context state payment for workers in child care centres would greatly reduce that burden and would equally create employment for those involved. Yet this strategy has not even been considered. Neither has there been any consideration of the implications of the idea in the Mid Term Review of the National Development Plan (Fitzgerald et al, 2005) , that in a knowledge based society, investment in subjects such as history could just as easily be traded internationally as any other kinds of knowledge- with obvious implications as regards investment by the state in facilitating Universities' attraction of international students in such areas.

Baker et al (2009:227) highlight the importance of 'naming and claiming an intellectual space for new narratives in public discourse'. The ability of social scientists to claim that space has long been questioned (Kane, 1996). We also need to recognise the absence of a clearly defined public arena in which such ideas can be put

forward. We simply do not have the Greek or Roman equivalent of a public space for discussion of ideas (an Agora or Forum respectively). Perhaps the nearest equivalent of this is the media- but its audiences are fractured by age, class, gender and region. However in the printed media, the gatekeepers (Husu, 2006) are working for commercial entities who have vested interests in the perpetuation of certain taken-for-granted views. Ging (2009: 69) noted that in such outlets ‘the broad acceptance of the myth that equality has been achieved..., have ultimately served to gloss over the substantial material inequalities between men and women’. The democratization of sources, reflected in the development of blogs such as [irisheconomy.com](http://irisheconomy.com), does offer interesting possibilities. Indeed, as Baker et al (2009:214) recognised, they are likely to become ‘one of the primary engines of change (or resistance to change) in contemporary societies’

Agencies such as the Equality Authority or Combat Poverty were clearly important in creating structural contexts that could commission research which challenged hegemonic realities and provided a structural context that legitimated it. However this seems unlikely to be the case in the future. Independently funded structures such as the Think Tank for Action on Social Change (TASC) may become increasingly important. Given the current economic crisis, space outside the institutional structures will exist- but it seems likely that this will encourage issue related actions rather than reflection on the power structures and their consequences. Certainly the emergence of the elderly as a power bloc in opposition to the medical card issue was of this kind of order.

It is very striking that despite huge economic, social and cultural changes in Irish society, the basic institutional structures and the profiles of those at the top of them , in terms of class and gender has changed very little. Thus it seems reasonable to suggest that the cultures of privilege and entitlement in them have changed little and that they provide less than fertile terrain for public intellectuals concerned with problematising such patterns.

### **So what can specifically can public intellectuals offer?**

Kirby et al (2009) suggest that public intellectuals are important in challenging common sense understandings, in mobilising people within broadly based social movements, and ultimately in impacting on institutional structures. At the most fundamental level, I see the role of a public intellectual as concerned with questioning the value premises, power structures and/or resource allocations of Irish society. Behind it is a more or less explicit version of what can crudely be described as a 'better world'- a world that is at odds with patriarchal and/or class privileging. The work of the School of Social Justice in UCD (Lynch, 1999a and b; Lynch and Lodge 2002; Baker et al, 2004 and 2009). In a number of universities, including the University of Limerick, and drawing on Connell (1995:104) gender is seen 'As a fundamental feature of the capitalist system'. Gender is seen as a property of institutions or processes, with social landscapes being more or less 'mapped' by gender at a social, cultural and psychological reality and having to do with labour, power and cathexis. The dramatic increases in the proportion of women managers in Primary Schools (Lynch, 1994) challenged the depiction of gendered patterns as 'natural' inevitable', 'what women want' and highlighted the importance of the wider organisational and societal and cultural context.

More specifically, firstly public intellectually can challenge the hi-jacking of discourses which facilitate a concern with 'a better world' e.g. the concept of fairness which is currently being used to justify the cutting of child benefit, a universal benefit paid in recognition of the fact that wages paid to individuals do not take account of the needs of children. This kind of argument raises the question of whether we want to favour those who do not have children over those who do. With childcare costs at E 1,000 a month in Dublin do we want to force those women who are in paid employment to give up that paid work because they cannot afford to pay for child care? Is the fact that child benefit is paid to the mother who is overwhelmingly seen as the person responsible for paying child care, at all relevant to those wishing to cut it? We know that channelling money through the mother increases the likelihood that it

will be spent on the children (Rottman, 1994)- is that important in a society where the extent of child poverty is already significantly higher than the OECD average (16% versus 12%: Mc Donough and Loughrey, 2009: 3) and is likely to increase? The state has long provided tax relief on payments to farm managers who are filling –in for farmers but it has never provided tax relief on childcare. Why not? The argument that it would be fairer to withdraw child benefit from well-off families begs the question as to why such families should not simply be taxed at the higher rate- thus promoting greater income inequality without disadvantaging children, since we know that the monies allocated to the mother are most likely to be spent on children.

Secondly they can mobilise wider community awareness through their own media presence (Vincent Browne’s columns on income inequality in Ireland is an excellent example of this). Thus has been widely recognised that there was a widening of the gap between the incomes of the top and the bottom 10 per cent in the 1990s with McDonogh and Loughrey (2009) showing that income inequality in Ireland was one third higher than in Sweden or Denmark. Furthermore although all incomes have decreased since the recession, there is a similar ratio between the incomes of those at the top and the bottom. We have seen recent assertions in the media that ‘fairness’ was likely to undermine the stability of the state. Implicitly, then, it is suggested that social welfare payments should be cut is simply to legitimate the low pay, gender discrimination and poor pension provision of those at the lowest levels of those in the private sector. Nevertheless, there is evidence that almost three quarters of adults were concerned at the extent of income inequality and 85 per cent felt that the government should take steps to reduce it (TASC, 2009). But with the effective disembowelling of Combat Poverty and the Equality Authority we may not be able to mobilise factual arguments like this in the future.

Thirdly public intellectuals can show solidarity and extend the boundaries of ‘me and mine’. In Ireland, the very ethos of ‘looking after your own’ (family, political colleagues, class based friends) is simultaneously our greatest strength and our Achilles heel (since it potentially legitimates corrupt practices). Kirby et al (2009)

argues that this very recognition of ties and obligations is a key element in the ultimate creation of social solidarity. Indeed, in a small society of 4.5m, it is possible to imagine a broader definition of 'our own' than that implied by family or tribe. For this to happen demands that the needs of the underprivileged and those without public voices are being included in that definition of 'our own'. The threat to cutting Community Development Programmes provoked an interesting example of cross sector mobilisation involving academics, those in the statutory sector as well as those in the civic and voluntary sector- in defence of programmes predominantly led by women, which serve the excluded in structures where they are also part of the management structure. It may well be that this kind of initiative will become more common and it offers interesting possibilities as regards extending the definition of 'me and mine'. In this context the intention of the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs to wind down and close the Community Development Projects in the most disadvantaged areas of the state (and the clearest example of institutional leadership provided by women) is not reassuring as regards the ability of the state to work with rather than against such forces.

Inevitably however, in the absence of violent political upheavals, the pace of change is likely to be glacial. Hence it is important to take a very long view and to focus on small achievements and particularly on consciousness raising and incremental change.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

It seems reasonable that the kind of society most people want for themselves and their children is one that is genuinely fair- that values children; that sees women as equal partners in the home and workplace; equally involved in the construction and transmission of knowledge and that recognises the structural inequalities which still exist in our society- whether on the basis of class or gender.

Yet that very notion of fairness is being eroded. Given that our social and political and economic structures are effectively in crisis, with confidence in both private and public power (as reflected in the market and the State) at a very low ebb, and likely to

remain so for some time, the role of public intellectuals is likely to be increasing important in the future. The extent to which such public intellectuals will be drawn from the academy remains to be seen. The extent to which they will reflect a diversity of perspectives in terms of social class and gender and will put forward visions of ‘a better world’ is even more problematic. To the extent to which they do, the more likely they are to foment informed debate and to contribute to a fundamental transformation of Irish society- eventually...

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